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PP RUEHDBU  
DE RUEHMO #5378/01 1391620  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 191620Z MAY 06  
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6191  
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE  
RUEHDX/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 005378

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/19/2016  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: RUSSIA'S DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION TO CONTINUE  
COOPERATION, BUT GENUINE UNITY UNLIKELY

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reasons 1.4 (B/D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Ambassador met separately May 16 with democratic opposition leaders Nikita Belykh of the Union of Right Forces (SPS) and Irina Khakamada of Our Choice. Belykh insisted that the democratic opposition must do more to rejuvenate the movement and demonstrate that it is capable of initiating creative ideas. The SPS might change its name as part of this broader effort. Belykh said that he favored continued coordination among democratic parties, but prospects for genuine unity, especially between Yabloko and SPS, were increasingly dim. He called President Putin's May 10 address to the nation disappointing since it failed to offer solutions to major problems. Belykh bemoaned the inability of the Belarus opposition to generate greater enthusiasm among voters, but predicted that President Lukashenko would come in for increased domestic criticism as Russia tightened the economic screws. Khakamada shared Belykh's assessment that Russia's democratic opposition would continue to coordinate its activities, but the principal parties likely would remain independent. On Russian perceptions of the U.S., both Belykh and Khakamada favored continued engagement with the Russian leadership, with Khakamada urging less public criticism and continued economic cooperation in order to keep open bilateral communications. END SUMMARY.

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NIKITA BELYKH  
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¶2. (C) In a May 16 meeting with the Ambassador, the leader of the SPS, Nikita Belykh, suggested that he might have to rename the party to attract broader public support. Belykh explained that the democratic opposition needed an infusion of new goals and younger, energetic leaders to demonstrate to Russia's electorate that it was capable of generating new ideas. Renaming the party would be part of this effort. The SPS leader professed continued support for cooperation among democratic opposition parties but said prospects for unity between his party and its main rival, Yabloko, were increasingly dim. Strategically, the two parties had different approaches to policy issues, especially at the federal level. Yabloko, for example, thought the 1990s were a disaster for the country, whereas SPS was less negative about developments under Yeltsin. Belykh said the parties were moving in different directions, with Yabloko forming alliances with environmentalists and human rights activists, while SPS would likely take in Vladimir Ryzhkov's Republican Party. In the meantime, SPS and Yabloko continued to cooperate and had agreed not to compete against each other in local and regional elections.

¶3. (C) Asked about the role former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov might play in this equation, Belykh was uncertain. On the one hand, Kasyanov might be waiting to see if the

democrats would be able to unite in anticipation of joining a consolidated movement. On the other hand, the former PM could be waiting for the opposition's unity efforts to fail so that he could offer a "third option" to voters. Belykh thought the latter approach would harm democrats in general, including Kasyanov, who would likely be perceived by voters as simply counting on his previous government experience to attract support without offering a specific program. It would be better, Belykh suggested, if Kasyanov joined forces now with other democrats.

14. (C) In response to the Ambassador's question about President Putin's May 10 address to the nation, Belykh thought it had been disappointing. While praising Putin for raising difficult issues like the country's demographic problems, his proposed solutions did not go far enough. For example, offering money to women who had more babies would simply result in the further "Islamization" of Russia since most of the government's subsidies would likely go to women who were already predisposed to having large families. Corruption also had to be addressed. Belykh said corruption's effects could be mitigated by increased political competition, such as that found in democratic societies. In authoritarian systems the problem becomes entrenched, especially when corrupt government officials act in concert with businessmen seeking official favors. Nonetheless, Belykh believed that Putin's address had been popular among many Russians because of its emphasis on building up the military, challenging the U.S., and protecting the nation. That was "scary," Belykh concluded without further comment.

15. (C) Turning to issues beyond Russia, Belykh observed that the opposition in Belarus had shaken up society there, but had not been fully prepared for the government's strong

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interference during the March electoral campaign or for its subsequent onslaught against opposition members. While it was true that Aleksandr Lukashenko had cheated during the elections, Belykh emphasized, a majority of voters still probably supported him. Much of that support could dissipate, however, if Moscow continued to step up pressure on Belarus, particularly with respect to energy prices and other economically-related subsidies. Belykh subscribed to the view that personal relations between Putin and Lukashenko were poor. Nonetheless, union talks would continue despite the current state of relations between the two countries' leaders.

16. (C) On Russian attitudes toward the U.S., Belykh suggested that Washington should offer a more consistent message regarding its Russia policy. In the past, it had been relatively simple to distinguish between the Republicans and Democrats in Washington, but now he perceived schisms even among Republicans, citing Senator John McCain's call for cancellation of the G-8 Summit as an example. Pointing to Vice President Cheney's speech in Vilnius, Belykh said he thought it had been crafted for U.S. domestic consumption, mainly to stem criticism from the Democratic Party. Belykh thought that Washington had to decide whether energy or democracy was more important in this part of the world.

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IRINA KHAKAMADA  
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17. (C) The Ambassador also met with Irina Khakamada of Our Choice on May 16. Responding to the Ambassador's questions about her association with Kasyanov and prospects for democratic unity, Khakamada asserted that Kasyanov was not a politician in the traditional sense, but he knew how to mobilize resources to achieve goals. He would be able to rely upon his previous government experience, including his ties to supporters and other contacts, to move the country in a positive direction. Khakamada acknowledged that Kasyanov

had little public support at the moment (roughly one percent), but she attributed that to several factors, including constraints on media access that limited his public exposure, an increasingly disinterested electorate that was more concerned about materialism than politics, and the continuing machinations of Presidential Administration Deputy Head Vladislav Surkov.

18. (C) More broadly, Khakamada noted that the democratic opposition would continue to coordinate its activities, especially at the local and regional levels, but implied that genuine unity among the parties was unlikely. She pointed to the relative success of the opposition in the Moscow city elections last December as an example of tactical cooperation, but noted as well that the Kremlin, along with its supporters in United Russia, had made it difficult for the opposition to compete. She cited specifically the imposition of a 10 percent threshold for entering the Moscow city legislature. The opposition had encountered similar obstacles during local and regional elections in March.

19. (C) On Putin's address to the nation, Khakamada concluded that the President's remarks reflected the views of the "political-ideological class" and characterized Putin's leadership style as "instrumental democracy." Although Russia's economy was doing reasonably well, she did not think momentum could be sustained without corresponding progress on building democracy. In the absence of stronger democratic institutions, the situation in Russia would only worsen. In any case, Khakamada said, she was not convinced that the majority of Russians would understand all the nuances of Putin's address and would hear only what they wished to hear.

10. (C) Asked about the U.S. role in Russia, Khakamada said that the situation was complicated. The Russian media had virtually reverted to the Soviet period when anti-American sentiment abounded. The conflict in Iraq, U.S. support for the "color" revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, and overall U.S. activism on issues affecting Moscow's interests rubbed Russians the wrong way. More consistency would also be helpful. Khakamada said public criticism of Russian policies was not helpful, pointing out that the current power structure was less pliable and more self-confident than during the Yeltsin era. In spite of the cooler bilateral relations, she encouraged continued economic cooperation, as well as coordination on other practical issues. Maintaining mutual trust in these areas could eventually improve the atmosphere for discussion of more sensitive political issues.

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